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*A Death Ceremonial of the "Kapola Bania" Caste.*—By  
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ON the seventh of December, 1899, I had the exceedingly rare, if not unique, privilege of witnessing one of the most elaborate and important of the Hindu ceremonials for the dead. The privilege came through the courtesy of Mr. Tribhowandas Mangaldas Nathubai of Bombay, in memory of whose deceased wife this was the eleventh of the appointed monthly ceremonials. Before I speak as an eye-witness, however, it will be helpful to the description to refer to the few things which I was able to learn in general about the death ceremonials of the caste to which my host belongs, and of which he is, perhaps, the most important lay member in Bombay.

As to the Kapola (Kapila or Kapāla?) Bania caste I have little information to give; although what I had seen of its temples, worship, and burning ghât the day before, as well as what I saw and heard at this ceremonial, all went to confirm the statement of Mr. Tribhowandas, that it is a "very orthodox caste." My informant added: "I am myself in my actions very liberal,"—a declaration confirmed by the fact that he is a prominent member of the Cosmopolitan Club of Bombay, that he has shown his independence by keeping his very pretty daughter unmarried until sixteen years of age, and that the ladies of his household are the only Hindu women of high caste whom I met in India that greeted me as a foreign gentleman in much the same manner as did the more cultivated Parsi ladies.

About this entire class of religious ceremonies as celebrated at present among this caste I quote from a pamphlet given me by Mr. Tribhowandas, and bearing his name as author, with the title "On the Death Ceremonies among the Kapola Bania and Others." This pamphlet opens with the following general statement: "It is one of the chief characteristics of Hinduism that every religious rite it teaches to be performed ceremoniously for the welfare of the soul; and so rigid is the adherence to the performance of the same that the observance thereof proves a super-

lative method of instructing how the belief in life after death is material and all-important among the Hindus. Their reasoning on this subject, when analysed, will be found very clear and explicit. Life and death, they argue, are the work of nature or its agent, the God Himself, but an observance of the rites enjoined, which secures them better lives, lies in the power of man. Man, consequently, should not be found wanting to perform the prescribed ceremonies, inasmuch as it assures a better birth after death."

The ceremonial which I witnessed is designated a *Çrāddha* (locally spelled *Shradha*); of which, besides those belonging to the days immediately after the decease, there are sixteen performed during the year. To quote again from the pamphlet: "Of all the ceremonies connected with the Hindu religion, the *Çrāddha* is the most important and the most expensive. . . . Its main features are the feeding of a large number of the Brahmins and his castemen, and in the presentation of offerings to the spirit of the person recently deceased and his ancestors. . . . This *Çrāddha* ceremony consists of the following features:

- (1) Sacrifice.
- (2) Offerings of rice balls.
- (3) Feeding of relatives and Brahmins.
- (4) Giving presents to Brahmins."

Of the four forms of the *Çrāddha* the one which I witnessed was called a "*Parvan*"—the name given to those ceremonies that are performed on certain moondays of every month.

Of all the "*Parvan Çrāddhas*" that of the eleventh month seems to be the most important, especially in the case of a widower; because only after this is he allowed to marry again. But as I understood this particular case, since the next wife would be the third, the marriage would be celebrated of the man with a sacred tree; for the third wife is particularly unlucky and destined to an early death.

The eleventh monthly ceremonial for the dead is, then, the most elaborate and imposing of all the *Çrāddhas*. The pamphlet to which reference has already been made describes it as follows: "In the eleventh month the ceremony performed (the *Varsh* ceremony) is named the *Nilohaha* (marriage of *Nilā*). *Nilā* means a cow [?] and a bull. The reason of this observance is that the milk, curdled milk, etc., all the products of the cow, are held as propitiating god, and hence this ceremony is observed."

"In the commencement of the observance of this rite, the divine goddesses or Matrukas are installed, and the ceremony of Grih Shunti is performed [*mātrkās* and *grhaṣānti*]. Then five jugs of water are installed. Then the Brahmans are worshipped ; after that certain gods, Indra and other Rudras, are invoked. Then a cow and a bull are decked in ornaments, and prayers are offered to them for securing the deceased ancestors from hell. Then water-sprinkling ceremony on the tail of the calf follows. Sprinkling this water in honor of the deceased, etc., the balls are offered." [These are the balls of rice, the offering of which is supposed to avail the deceased for the restoration of the different parts of the body. "The first is for the head. The second is for the restoration of the ears. The third is for the restoration of eyes, nose, arms, breast, etc."] "Twenty-seven balls of rice are placed at the hoofs of the bull."

"It is said that the offerings of rice-balls at the hoofs of the cow and bull secure a happy state in the next world for those on whose behalf such balls are offered."

"In this ceremony twenty-seven balls are offered for those who have died lately on the paternal as well as on the maternal side, for those who have committed suicide, for those that have died by unnatural death, and so on."

"Placing these offerings on blades of *kuṣa* grass and sprinkling water, *tila* [sesame] seeds and flowers and throwing a silken *digogee* over the balls, the ceremony is brought to a close."

Thus far the information derived from the printed description of the death ceremonial of the eleventh month, as prescribed for the faithful of the Kapola Bania caste. It will appear from the following narrative that I saw only a part of the whole ceremonial—namely, the feeding of the Brahmans, the worship of the Çankara-ācārya or spiritual leader and head of the caste, the propitiatory offerings and symbolic sacrifices, and the "improvement" of the occasion for instructing the faithful in the way of salvation. Whether the performance with the cow and the bull was strictly carried out, I am unable to say ; although I had seen an impromptu attempt to worship the sacred cows the day before, at temples of the caste. The invitation as originally given included only the feeding of the Brahmans ; how it came about that this invitation was so greatly extended, the narrative itself will disclose. This narrative I copy from my diary as it was made out on the forenoon following the ceremonial, with great care to be

accurate, and with the assistance of Dr. Robert Hume of Ahmednagar, who was present and is eminently competent to correct any mistakes of observation or interpretation which I might otherwise have made.

On arriving at the house of Mr. Tribhowandas we were met at the front door by the servant and immediately conducted to the drawing-room floor above, where our host welcomed us. He himself then escorted us into the garden, where we saw the Brahmans, who had already gathered to the number of more than a hundred and were seated in a double row upon the ground. Before each was placed a round platter made of banyan leaves pieced together by small wooden pegs; and on each platter were two or three cups and dishes, made by joining together two leaves of the same tree. In a place apart squatted a considerable number of the wives and children of the Brahmans. Most of the men had a silk cloth around the loins, such as Brahmans wear when "purified" and ready for such a feast. But in some cases quite ordinary and not very clean cotton cloth was made to serve for the raiment.

On our way to a convenient row of windows in the upper part of the house, from which to view "the feeding," we were shown into the large drawing-room which had been prepared for the approaching ceremonies. This room was in size, I should think, not less than 80 ft. by 40 ft.; and around the two sides and one end was arranged a single row of sofas and chairs upon the bare floor, the large carpet in the center having been folded under so as to give space for passing to, and in front of, the seats without stepping upon it. This, it was explained, was done because the woolen of the carpet would gather and transmit defilement to the "religious men" who might come in contact with it. As subsequent performances seemed to show, this precaution was formal and ceremonial merely, for we, although unpurified and not Brahmans, afterward were led across the same carpet; and upon it, after it had been defiled by us, the holy men of the caste sat down to witness the ceremony.

This experience was only one of many in India which show a gradual relaxation of the rigor of ceremonial details. I may remark in this connection that I was subsequently in Calcutta allowed to take in my hands a very ancient Tamil palm-leaf Vedic manuscript—a species of pollution which, it was said, no volume of the sort in the library had ever endured before.

Across one end of the room a dais of about five inches in height had been raised, and on it were placed two chairs and the most elegantly carved of the sofas. In front of the dais stood a table spread with paraphernalia to be used in the Çrāddha or death ceremonial. After being several times warned that, of course, we must not touch anything, we were invited to approach the table and see the arrangements. On it was a round silver salver; and on this were small silver bowls containing milk, curds, rice, honey, sugar, saffron, shredded saffron, and *kunku*,—a carmine-colored pigment made by mixing turmeric, lemon juice, alum, and oil. There was also a silver holder for incense sticks, a small silver censer, a vase or font with a silver ladle, and a supply of flowers.

Passing now to our place of observation in a distant part of the house, we soon saw the servants of our host begin to distribute the food, which consisted of fried flour-cakes, pulse soup, rice with several vegetable curries, and sweet-meats. Before the feasting began, a son in the family poured water on the ground from his hands: when a short Mantra (called Sankalpa) or auspicious verse was pronounced by a Brahman. Then the entire company chanted aloud. Each Brahman, before he began to eat, poured a little water upon the ground as an offering to the earth; after which all "fell to" in a manner to prove that they are no mean trencher-men. Great pains were taken that, in drinking, the water should be poured down the throat without being contaminated by the lips, or teeth, or mouth. They all, of course, fed themselves with their fingers. One elderly Brahman was observed to be eating with his left hand only—either because his other hand was withered or out of respect to a vow. To carry the hand to the mouth under the leg seemed especially meritorious; and this feat, on account of his lean thigh, long arm and hand, and superior deftness in the use of his fingers, is much easier for the Hindu to accomplish than it would be for the average Englishman.

Our host had excused himself and left us in charge of two attendants. Presently we were told that the Çankara-ācārya was approaching and that we must return to the drawing-room, if we wished to see him. On reaching the place I inquired, in the spirit of experiment but with an appearance of *naïveté*, whether we (not being members of the caste) would be permitted to remain to witness the ceremonial. Mr. Tribhowandas was

undoubtedly considerably embarrassed by the question ; but he politely concealed his embarrassment and, saying that he would go and inquire, left the room. I suppose, of course, that he went to see what arrangements could be made with the Çankara-âcârya ; and what these arrangements were will never be known to any of us. At any rate, on his return, to my great surprise we were invited to the seats of honor on the right hand of the dais.

The room now began rapidly to be filled. The prominent members of the caste, as they entered the room, were greeted and shown to seats on the sofas and chairs. The women and children of the family sat on the floor opposite to where we were seated. The Brahmans, having finished their feasting, came into the room in small groups and seated themselves upon the carpet at the lower end and farthest from the dais.

Soon a commotion arose at the principal door of the drawing-room ; a heralding voice was heard ; and the Çankara-âcârya appeared with his attendants, one of whom bore a long silver mace and another a fly-flap of white horse-hair with an embossed silver handle.

The entire company rose to its feet as the religious leader appeared at the door and remained standing until he had taken his seat. He strode rapidly forward—crossing the carpet instead of avoiding it (his feet, however, were kept from pollution by his wooden *getas*)—and seated himself in Turkish fashion upon the sofa on the dais. He was a strikingly handsome man of apparently thirty-five years of age, shapely in limb and with a strong and manly countenance. His cloth was a silk of light salmon color ; and his turban was of the same color trimmed with gold. The attendant with the fly-flap stationed himself behind the Çankara-âcârya,—the appropriate position for his useful function. On his left hand stationed themselves the attendant with the silver mace, the Brahman of the Bombay community who was to recite the ritual, and several other attendants. The space in front of us was courteously kept open, in order that we might the better observe the ceremony.

The ceremonial began with the bringing in of a large silver salver, which was set in front of and below the Çankara-âcârya and on it his sandals were placed. He then rested his right leg upon its sandal, keeping his left leg still under him. Mr. Tribhondas squatted on the dais on the right, and the assistant Brah-

man sat on the opposite side of the silver salver. The ceremony began with the chanting of certain Mantras in Sanskrit by this Brahman. The Çankara-âcârya himself, throughout, took no part in the ceremonial. He was always worshipped, never worshipper. Or more precisely, his right toe was made the object of worship, with substantially the same formulas as those with which I had seen the idols and the sacred cows worshipped the day before. Upon this humble member of his exalted person were placed the blossoms of flowers, and over it were poured milk, curds, honey, and water. It was anointed with *kunku*, and from time to time wiped with a soft towel.

Three impressions were made upon me by this part of the ceremonial: (1) that the precise order and significance of the things done were not at all clear in the mind of the person chiefly concerned, or even in the mind of the Brahman who was guiding the ritual. There was no little indecision and hesitation at various points; and sometimes almost a complete stand-still for a time. (2) The worshippers appeared to be considering the effect upon the foreign guests present rather than upon the body of the Brahmans present. And (3) everything was purely formal and ceremonial—a going-through with a certain routine under instructions that were followed without any particular regard to their significance, and with no show of the feelings that might naturally be associated with a death ceremonial.

After the ceremony of worshipping the foot of the Çankara-âcârya had been finished, Mr. Tribhowandas had his forehead marked with three horizontal stripes of *kunku*, as became a devotee of Çiva, the god chiefly worshipped by the Kapola Bania caste; and a similar "sealing" of the forehead was offered to such of the faithful as wished to receive it. One or more sofas-full of the laymen of the caste, I noticed, declined the offer.

Next followed the bestowal of gifts upon the Çankara-âcârya and upon the other chief personages who had taken part in the preceding ceremony. About the âcârya's shoulders was thrown a beautiful camel's hair shawl of soft yellowish color, with dark-reddish embroidery; and a shawl of carmine color, little less beautiful, was laid upon the shoulder of the principal attendant Brahman. Upon a silver plate Mr. Tribhowandas poured out a store of rupees, and was followed in this by his daughter and sons until about one hundred and fifty coins were piled upon the plate. Meanwhile a gift of ten and a quarter annas (about twenty cents)



was distributed by one of the sons to each of the assembled Brahmans. The gift must properly be some multiple of five ; and the additional one-quarter anna meant that it was “good measure, pressed down and (slightly) running over.”

After receiving these gifts the Çankara-âcārya had garlands thrown over his head and a huge bouquet was handed to him. The bouquet he at once laid on the sofa beside him ; and soon, the garlands seeming to become irksome (as I know from repeated experiences they do), he signified to an attendant his wish to have these floral decorations removed.

Soon the man with the silver mace gave a shout : “Salutation to the Maharaja ; do him reverence,” and all the people saluted with a shout in response. This title of “Great King” is commonly bestowed upon the pontiff of the sect.

The death ceremonial being thus brought to a close, an address from the Çankara-âcārya proved to be next in order. He graciously sent word to me, asking on what particular topic I might wish to hear him speak ; and I—not to be outdone in graciousness—replied that I should wish to hear him upon any topic on which he was pleased to speak. Through this interchange of courtesies there was secured for the foreign guests an authoritative statement of the present-day position as to the “way of salvation” held by “one of the most orthodox of the Hindu sects.” The speaker was very fluent and pleasing in manner. Each paragraph was first given in Sanskrit, and then repeated, in paraphrase, in Hindustani. For “substance of doctrine” it was as follows—in all its essential points the same as all the more intelligent claims to infallible authority set up by the other “world-religions.”

The discourse began with unbounded praise of the sacred scriptures of the Hindu religion, the Vedas. They are the original, only and infallible source of all true religion ; they point out the way of salvation, and there is no other way than that which they point out. Whoever walks in this way, and does as the Vedas instruct him, he has the true religion, he is safe. But whoever departs from this way, his religion is false, and he will not attain salvation, but will be punished in this life and in the life to come. But whereas most men are ignorant, and do not understand the Vedas, and so know not the way of salvation, the Brahman knows the way. He gives all his time, his entire life, to the study of these things. He is to be believed and obeyed,

and his instructions are to be followed in every particular. He who disobeys the voice of the Brahman or refuses to learn of him, and to follow the way the Brahman directs, cannot find the way of salvation, but he is of necessity ignorant and miserable in this life and in the life to come. As to the women, however, their chief duty, and the summing up of religion for them, is to be faithful and obedient to their husbands.

The discourse closed with a general and warm exhortation to be faithful to their religion, to be confident in its superiority to every other religion, and always to reverence and implicitly to obey the Brahmins.

After the Çankara-âcârya had finished his discourse, he expressed his willingness to answer any questions or objections that might be proposed. Whereupon, at once, an old man who was a local Vaidya, or doctor, arose and repeated in Gujarati—popularizing and illustrating—a part of what the religious leader of the caste had proclaimed. This aged expounder of the faith was, however, especially minute, insistent, and even excited, when he came to discourse upon the duties of women. He seemed, indeed, rather to go beyond the Çankara-âcârya in expounding and applying this tenet. Not to disobey or to cross their husbands in any way—this was the principal religious duty of woman, upon which the salvation of her soul depended. And for the child-wife, her duty was to be obedient to her mother-in-law. As the speaker waxed somewhat heatedly eloquent upon this summary of true religion for the female portion of the audience, the male portion of the faithful broke into applause by clapping their hands.

After the religious addresses were finished, a young man who was a relative of the family made a short speech, in Gujarati, in which, in the behalf of the family, he thanked those present for their courtesy in assisting at the death ceremonial. And then, to my amazement, he branched off into an extravagant eulogy of the foreign guest who had done the family the honor to be present, and ended with the expression of the hope that this guest would carry back to his native land and report there what he had seen and heard, in order that the false impression current regarding the Hindu religion might be corrected thereby.

After the audience was dismissed Mr. Tribhowandas came up to shake hands and bid us good-bye. He assured us that in consideration of his dignity and influence in the caste, and at his

very urgent request, we had been accorded an entirely unique privilege. So far as I have been able to learn, this statement is strictly true. And it is in grateful recognition of the courtesy, and in the desire to meet the expectation that I would correctly report what I heard and saw, that I have prepared this paper.

So far as I am able to summarize the import of the transaction it confirms the views so naïvely expressed by the pamphlet from which I have quoted. "A Hindu life, if we properly observe, is nothing but a life of ceremonies."